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ABSTRACT

A brief review of Indian education focuses on special problems caused by overcrowded schools, insufficient funding, and the status of education itself in the Indian social structure. Language instruction in India, a complex issue due largely to the numerous official languages currently spoken, is commented on with special reference to the problem of acculturation of immigrants into the English educational system in India. (RL)

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Schools and Languages in India

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The first point to make about the Indian immigrant child is that his level of scholastic attainment, even in his mother tongue, will typically be lower than that of an English child of the same age. (An important minority of Indian immigrant children, those whose fathers are doctors, for example, will have been educated in private, usually English-medium schools. Their attainments might well be higher.)

Indian schools are overcrowded. Class-rooms are ill-lit and the children crowded closely together. I have taught many classes in corridors. The teacher's desk is at the front and the desks or benches are arranged regimentally, in close order down the room. In rural areas there may be neither desks nor benches. The cost of an exercise book may be a major obstacle for many pupils. The only piece of equipment in the room usually is a blackboard, and there may not even be that. I heard of one teacher in a country district of Mysore who when a promised blackboard failed to arrive used a tethered water-buffalo (they are jet-black and docile) instead. I hope he gets a job as Professor of Education, because his adaptability is rare and probably more use to India than any number of visiting foreigners lecturing on the use of super 8 mm film, or whatever, in the classroom.

The most common form of teaching, even well down the secondary school, is the lecture. Oxbridge and India's pseudo-Oxbridges are largely to blame for this. Dialogue in the classroom is rare; pupil's opinions are rarely sought, and, when given, rarely encouraged. The pupil's role, comfortably for the teacher, is that of a sponge: he will absorb knowledge, store it, and regurgitate it under stimulus, but he will not himself be affected. I blame no-one particularly for this situation. It is a product of past and recent history and present poverty of environment. Many Indian educationalists are as critical as I am, and are having some success in finding remedies. In a society where jobs are scarce and finding one almost a matter of survival, it is impossible to be harsh or supercilious if education is seen not as a training in thought but merely as a means to the end of a good degree or diploma and a passport to a certain measure of material comfort. Many Indian parents make incredible sacrifices for their children's education.

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The status of the teacher, high in the Indian conventional wisdom, has I believe been inexorably declining over the last twenty years, as has that of government service generally. The Indian mother no longer necessarily dreams of a husband in the Administrative Service for her daughter, but probably of a junior executive in a large Bombay firm. One friend of mine in that position, a young man with great charm of manner but no other noticeable qualifications than the title of Rajkumar and an education at a minor English public school, earned more at the age of 23

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than another friend, a middle-aged university professor and an economist of international reputation. The primary school teacher earns as little as £9 a month, and this is often in arrears. I knew of a primary school headmaster in North Africa who sold the school when his salary was a year in arrears, but I have not yet heard of this particular remedy being tried in India. A teacher conscious of his unexalted place in society is in my experience all the more likely to compensate by being over-conscious of his dignity in the classroom. This generalisation I believe to be generally true of India; the teacher likes to keep his distance from the children and to resist a methodology which would involve him with them. An Indian immigrant child when suddenly faced with English child-centred child-involving methods is likely either to regard this as an alien game beyond his comprehension or to assume that his teacher is at best a slack disciplinarian and at worst feeble-witted.

I should now say something about the extremely complex language question in India. At independence the boundaries of the states which formed the Indian Union, whatever else they were based on, were not based on language. However, after adjustments, there are now, I think, twelve official languages in India, (though one tends to lose count) with English as an associate language. English was until recent years the accepted link language; there has been intense political agitation including riots in the North for its replacement by Hindi, but the South and especially Tamiland wishes to keep English, as Southerners fear being disadvantaged if Hindi becomes essential for government jobs. In spite of this English still retains much prestige. It is the language of the Armed Services and the Administrative Service, the lingua franca of business, and the medium of instruction of most universities. Even at these levels constitutional alternatives are now being provided, though the value of English remains such that many Hindi-advocating politicians send their own children to English-medium schools. (In divorcing public policy from private life they have of course had many parallels in England from Harry Pollitt to C.P. Snow.)

In the schools the position is further complicated by the fact that a child has a right to be educated in its own mother tongue, and where a minority community reaches a certain and fairly low percentage of the total community, then instruction in that mother tongue must be provided. In the city where I worked there were eight different media of instruction that I knew of. To ensure that all children were equally burdened by language a measure known as the three-language formula was adopted. Thus in Andhra a child of Urdu-speaking parents would learn Urdu, Telugu, the language of the state, and one of the link languages, Hindi or English. Where mother tongue and state language coincide, then the child will learn that and two other languages. Since language teaching methods are outdated the general result is that the child may know and be able to use his mother tongue, but will be inarticulate and not highly literate in the others. Self-expression will not have been encouraged. Even the Indian languages are taught in highly classicised forms.

In English, in spite of partial reform in some areas, curricula are unrealistic and textbooks unsuitable. High School pupils are expected to cope with Shakespeare and Emerson. When they arrive at university, where the medium of instruction will probably be in English, they will typically have an active vocabulary of only 800 words. It is not surprising that they occasionally go on strike. It is evident from all

this that the Indian immigrant child, unless he is of fortunate circumstances and from an English-medium school, will have a low standard of English, that he will need specialised and intensive coaching in English, with the emphasis on comprehension and the expressive skills to boost his linguistic confidence generally. I disagree most strongly with the notion expressed recently by an English C. E. O. that this job can be done by a man or woman with no knowledge of the problems of teaching English as a second or foreign language, and no knowledge of the pedagogical and social difficulties he or she will have to face precisely because the immigrant child's culture is an alien one. In-service training at least will be essential.

Finally, I suppose that English schools with Indian immigrant children will have to face the problem of what degree of acculturation to the English norm is desirable. Parents should I think be consulted difficult and delicate task though this may be; many Sikh parents, for example, strongly conscious of their own traditional values and cultural identity, react with horror, justifiably or not, to the permissiveness of our own teenage and pop manifestations. Many cherish the dream, perhaps unrealistically, of an eventual return to the Punjab.

Acculturation is anyway at its best a two-way process, and immigrants in the past (Huguenots in England, Jews in Poland, Parsees in India, everybody in the U. S. A.) have given much to as well as taken from their host countries. The problem is very often in getting the host country to realise it.